

'Make way for national oceans policy'

By Sam Farr, Member of Congress

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To achieve a lasting impact on ocean conservation and preservation demands more than lip service. It requires action and courage. And there isn't a better example to be found than Margo Pellegrino.

Margo is a stay-at-home mom, married with two children. But she also has a passion for our oceans, a passion that led her to leave home in New Jersey for three months--leaving behind her husband and two children--and paddle her kayak nearly 2,000 miles from Miami to Maine.

This week, Margo is more than two months into her expedition and expects to reach Newport on July 4. Some of her experiences would take your breath away. One moment in particular offers a perfect analogy for how many have responded to the misuse of our oceans and our desire to save them.

In late May, Margo was paddling across Sapelo Sound off the coast of Georgia. She found the going easy--until the wind picked up. Then picked up some more. With strong winds buffeting her, waves began to slam her boat. Soon, Margo's kayak was leaping out of the water, airborne. "My light craft bounced and dove like a horse on a tight jump course," Margo later wrote in her online journal.

With a numb foot unable to work the rudder and her boat angled parallel to the waves, Margo knew she was in trouble. But she took stock of the situation. She reminded herself why she was alone in the water instead of home with her children, why she was carrying this burden. She realized her task was worth the struggle. She gathered her courage and forged on, left behind what she call "washing-machine waves" and made it to land.

This tale provides a fitting illustration. It reminds me of how many people approach ocean conservation. The task is awesome, sometimes overwhelming, and we could easily give up. But

we must overcome our fear, we must forge on. The task is too important. I know it, Margo knows it and certainly the people of New England know it.

New England's past and present are closely entwined with its waters and coastline. Rhode Island alone boasts 400 wonderful miles of coast. But the Ocean State shares a fate with so many of its neighbors: a conflicted existence with the ocean. A large portion of the state's coastline is in danger from rising sea levels, with large swathes of low-lying areas in danger of flooding.

But development in these areas continues, endangering land, property and lives. This illustrates a common tension between ocean and industry: how do we balance shoreline preservation with the need for development? It's this sort of situation that begs for a national oceans policy, a federal policy that encourages regional and ecosystem management. Applying the same set of federal rules to the waters of Narragansett Bay as apply to Washington's Puget Sound is madness, yet that's the murky situation in which we find ourselves.

I have long promoted a national ocean policy, and to that end I introduced legislation on the first day of Congress this year: Oceans-21. We've been saddled with a patchwork of overlapping and conflicting agencies and rules for far too long. It's time for Congress to step up and take a more forceful role in promoting policy that will tackle the many problems facing our oceans. This bill, H.R. 21, has bipartisan support and is a big step in that direction. Fifty-six of my colleagues are cosponsoring this legislation, including Rep. Patrick Kennedy, (D-R.I.).

As we continue our work to establish a robust ocean policy in Congress, I encourage each and every one of you to move beyond the gloomy outlook over the future of our oceans and struggle to work on protecting them for many generations to come. Margo would be proud of you.

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